



At Risk: All Ethnic and Cultural Groups

This information sheet is designed to raise awareness that disordered eating behaviors can occur among all ethnic groups. It highlights findings from recent studies and provides suggestions on how to discourage disordered eating and promote the early detection of eating disorders among all students.

Women and girls of all ethnic groups are susceptible to eating disorders

Many people believe that eating disorders commonly occur among affluent white females. Although the prevalence of these disorders elsewhere in the population is much lower, increasing numbers of cases are being seen in males and minorities.¹

Girls and women from all ethnic and racial groups may suffer from eating disorders and disordered eating. The specific nature of the most common eating problems, as well as risk and protective factors, may vary from group to group, but no population is exempt.² Research findings regarding prevalence rates and specific types of problems among particular groups are limited, but it is evident that disturbed eating behaviors and attitudes occur across all cultures.³

Large percentages of African American, American Indian, and Hispanic females are overweight. Being overweight is a risk factor for engaging in disordered eating behaviors. Risk factors and incidence rates for eating disorders can vary dramatically among subgroups of a specific population.

Group identity may play a role in eating disordered development

Strong identification with a group culture can increase self-esteem and provide community support that helps protect young people from developing many health risks, including disordered eating and eating disorders. Young people may reject their group values and be more



susceptible to peer pressure and media messages regarding beauty.⁴

Latina women were almost expected to be more overweight. Latina women living in Puerto Rico were not uncomfortable with extra weight. To them, it wasn't extra. It wasn't an issue.⁵

—Laura, Puerto Rican native
who had bulimia as a teenager

Eating disorders among ethnically and culturally diverse girls may be underreported and undetected

Eating disorders among ethnically and culturally diverse girls may be underreported due to the lack of population-based studies that include representatives from these groups. The perception that non-white females are at decreased risk may also contribute to the lack of detection. Stereotyped body images of



ethnically diverse women (e.g., petite Asian American, heavier African American) can also deter detection. In addition, for some ethnic and cultural groups, seeking professional help for emotional problems is not a common practice.

Girls of different ethnic and cultural groups often receive treatment for the accompanying symptoms of an eating disorder, such as depression or malnutrition, rather than for the eating disorder itself. When these girls are finally diagnosed as having an eating disorder, the disorder (especially anorexia), tends to be more severe. This problem is exacerbated by the difficulty they may have in locating culturally sensitive treatment centers.

To deal with my eating disorder, I had to face my loneliness and insecurity. I had to shift my perspective and my lifestyle before I could let go of the excess weight and work on becoming strong and healthy. Now I realize that my experience is shared by many Black women.⁶

—Victoria Johnson, African American fitness expert

School personnel can help

Here are some ideas:

- ◆ Provide students with diverse role models, of all shapes and sizes, who are praised for their accomplishments, not their appearance.
- ◆ Invite community representatives to speak about specific cultural attitudes toward food preferences, dietary practices, and body image.
- ◆ Provide students with information on the relationship between nutrition and overall health.
- ◆ Gather and disseminate culturally sensitive materials on eating disorders, puberty, and other adolescent health issues.
- ◆ Conduct media literacy activities that allow students to examine critically how magazines, television, and other media—including those targeting specific cultural groups—present the concept of beauty.
- ◆ Encourage children and adolescents of all ethnic and cultural groups to exercise and participate in sports and other athletic activities.

- ◆ Advocate for a safe and respectful school environment that prohibits gender, culture, and racial stereotyping as well as sexual harassment, teasing, and bullying.

Definitions

Anorexia nervosa is self-starvation. People with this disorder eat very little even though they are thin. They have an intense and overpowering fear of body fat and weight gain.

Bulimia nervosa is characterized by cycles of binge eating and purging, either by vomiting or taking laxatives or diuretics (water pills). People with bulimia have a fear of body fat even though their size and weight may be normal.

Overexercising is exercising compulsively for long periods of time as a way to burn calories from food that has just been eaten. People with anorexia or bulimia may overexercise.

Binge eating disorder means eating large amounts of food in a short period of time, usually alone, without being able to stop when full. The overeating or bingeing is often accompanied by feeling out of control and followed by feelings of depression, guilt, or disgust.

Disordered eating refers to troublesome eating behaviors, such as restrictive dieting, bingeing, or purging, which occur less frequently or are less severe than those required to meet the full criteria for the diagnosis of an eating disorder.

End Notes

¹ "Practice Guidelines for Eating Disorders." *American Psychiatric Association Practice Guidelines*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1993.

² Striegel-Moore, R.H. & Smolak, L. "The Influence of Ethnicity on Eating Disorders in Women." In R.M. Eisler, M. Hersen (eds), *Handbook of Gender, Culture, and Health*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, in press.

³ Douchis, J.Z., Hayden H., Wifley D.E. "Obesity, Eating Disorders, and Body Image in Ethnically Diverse Children and Adolescents." In J.K. Thompson, L. Smolak (eds), *Body Image, Eating Disorders, and Obesity in Children and Adolescents: Theory, Assessment, Treatment, and Prevention*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2000.

⁴ Root, M.P.P. "Disordered Eating in Women of Color." *Sex Roles*, 22 (7/8), 525-536, 1990.

⁵ Thompson, B.W. *A Hunger So Wide and So Deep*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1994, p. 29.

⁶ Crute, S. (ed). *Health and Healing for African-Americans*. Emmaus, PA: Rodale Press, Inc., 1997, p. 92.